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AUTHOR Lee, Courtland C.
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ABSTRACT

Young black males in contemporary American society face major challenges to their development and well-being. Social, cultural, and economic forces have combined to keep black males from assuming traditional masculine roles. Counselors committed to the cause of black male empowerment can play an active role in promoting developmental initiatives at both the elementary and secondary level. Empowerment interventions for young black males must take into account African and African/American culture and its crucial role in fostering socialization. Counselors committed to black male empowerment may need to assume the role of educational advocate. (ABL)

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Empowering Young Black Males

Courtland C. Lee

Introduction

Young Black males in contemporary American society face major challenges to their development and well-being. Social and economic indicators of Black male development provide a profile of an individual whose quality of life is in serious jeopardy. Significantly, the literature in recent years has referred to the young Black male as an endangered species (Gibbs, 1988). From an early age, it has become increasingly apparent that Black males are confronted with a series of obstacles in their attempts to attain academic, career and personal-social success.

The Black Male in America's Schools

Black male youth face formidable challenges to their educational development. Statistics on educational attainment would suggest that many Black youth are at-risk in the nation's schools. However, a closer examination of the data indicates that Black males are at greatest risk. According to Reed (1988):

- The overall mean achievement scores for Black male students are below those of other groups in the basic subject areas.
- Black males are much more likely to be placed in classes for the educable mentally retarded and for students with learning disabilities than in gifted and talented classes.
- Black males are far more likely to be placed in general education and vocational high school curricular tracks than in an academic track.
- Black males are suspended from school more frequently and for longer periods of time than other student groups.
- Black females complete high school at higher rates than Black males.

Such data are compounded by the fact that Black males are frequently the victims of negative attitudes and lowered expectations from teachers, counselors, and administrators. Educators may expect to encounter academic and social problems from Black males, which often leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy (Washington & Lee, 1982).

Frustration, underachievement or ultimate failure, therefore, often comprise the contemporary educational reality for scores of Black male youth. It is evident that Black males from kindergarten through high school tend to experience significant alienation from America's schools. The consequences of this are major limitations on socioeconomic mobility, ultimately leading to high rates of unemployment, crime, and incarceration for massive numbers of young Black men.

Psychosocial Development of Young Black Males

Theorists such as Erikson (1950) have suggested that major aspects of human development unfold in a series of life stages. As individuals progress through the life stages, they must achieve a series of developmental tasks. The achievement of these tasks at one stage of life influences success with tasks in succeeding stages.

When considering the psychosocial development of young Black males, it is important to note that social, cultural and economic forces throughout American history have combined to keep Black males from assuming traditional masculine roles (Staples, 1982). The historical persistence of these forces and limited access to masculine status have generally resulted in significant social disadvantage for Black males. In many cases, this disadvantage has prevented them from mastering crucial developmental tasks in childhood and adolescence, which in turn negatively influences their academic, career, and social success in later stages of life.

African American Culture: Its Importance to Black Male Socialization

Empowerment interventions for young Black males must take into account African/African American culture and its crucial role in fostering socialization. An examination of core Black culture (i.e., those attitudes, values and behaviors which have developed in homogeneous Black communities where rudimentary Afrocentric ways have been preserved in relatively large measure), will reveal that many Black boys are socialized within a cultural tradition that places a high premium on group-centered cooperation and fosters development through cognitive, affective, and behavioral expressiveness (Nobles, 1980; Pasteur & Toldson, 1982).

The cultural dimensions of Black male socialization can often be seen in peer group interactions among boys. Within these groups young boys often develop unique and expressive styles of behavior sometimes referred to as "cool pose" (Majors, 1986). "Cool pose" has a significant relationship with optimal mental health and well-being for young Black males. Observing Black male youth, the dimensions associated with "cool pose" are readily apparent in such phenomena as the expressiveness of rap music or athletic prowess.

Empowerment Interventions: Guidelines for Action

The academic and social challenges which confront Black male youth in the school setting suggest a pressing need for programmed intervention on the part of educators. Counselors committed to the cause of Black male empowerment can play an active role in promoting developmental initiatives at both the elementary and secondary level. Such initiatives must focus on helping Black male youth develop attitudes, behaviors, and values necessary to function at optimal levels at school and in the world. Young Black males need specific guidance to master educational challenges.

Such guidance might be provided through culture-specific developmental group counseling experiences in the elementary or secondary school setting. These empowerment experiences should develop the attitudes and skills necessary for academic achieve-

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ment, foster positive and responsible behavior, provide opportunities to critically analyze the image of Black men, expose participants to Black male role models, and develop a sense of cultural and historical pride in the accomplishments of Black men.

Four general guidelines are suggested for the development of any school-based empowerment strategies:

Empowerment strategies should be developmental in nature. Far too often, the only guidance young Black males receive comes after they have committed an offense against the social order. Generally the goal of such guidance is not development, but rather punishment. Concerned counselors should act in a proactive manner to help empower Black male youth to meet challenges that often lead to problems in school and beyond.

Empowerment strategies should provide for competent adult Black male leaders. This is important for two reasons. First, only a Black man can teach a Black boy how to be a man. By virtue of attaining adult status as Black and male, he alone has the gender and cultural perspective to accurately address the developmental challenges facing Black boys. While Black women and individuals of both sexes from other ethnic backgrounds can play a significant role in helping to empower young Black males, it is only a Black man who can model the attitudes and behaviors of successful Black manhood. Second, there is a paucity of Black male educators in American schools. It is not unusual for a Black boy to go through an entire school career and have little or no interaction with a Black male teacher, counselor, or administrator. When necessary, therefore, efforts should be made to actively recruit, train, and support competent Black men who can serve as leaders or role models in empowerment interventions.

Empowerment strategies should incorporate African/African American culture. Counselors should find ways to incorporate African American (Black) cultural dimensions into the empowerment process for young Black males. Culture-specific approaches to counseling intervention transform basic aspects of Black life, generally ignored or perceived as negative in the traditional educational framework, into positive developmental experiences. For example, Black art forms (e.g., music, poetry) and culture-specific curriculum materials might be incorporated into empowerment interventions as counseling or educational aids.

Empowerment strategies should include some type of "Rites-of-Passage" ceremony. Unlike the traditions of African culture where great significance was attached to the transition from boyhood to manhood, there is little ceremony in Black American culture for the formal acknowledgement of life transitions for young boys. It is important, therefore, that at the completion of any empowerment experience for Black boys there is some ceremonial acknowledgement of their accomplishment. Parents and men from the community should be encouraged to participate in such "rites-of-passage" ceremonies.

Educational Advocacy for Black Male Students

As previously mentioned, the academic and social problems confronting Black male students are often exacerbated by the attitudes and practices of educators, which often suggest a lack of sensitivity or understanding of Black culture and the dynamics of male development. Counselors committed to Black male empowerment, therefore, may need to assume the role of ***educational advocate.*** Educational advocacy involves consultation activities initiated by counselors to help their fellow educators better understand the dynamics of male development from a Black perspective and make the teaching-learning process more relevant to Black male realities.

The following are guidelines for such consultation activities:

Educator attitudes and behavior. It is an educator's unalterable responsibility to challenge and to change any attitudes or behaviors which may be detrimental to the welfare of Black male students. Educational advocates, therefore, should help school personnel: (1) examine the incidence of discipline in the classroom to ensure that Black males are not receiving a disproportionate share of reprimands or negative feedback; (2) delineate and challenge stereotypes they may have acquired about Black boys and their expectations of them; and (3) develop an understanding of gender and cultural diversity.

Curriculum content and methods. Optimal learning occurs when a Black male perceives that he and his unique view of the world is appreciated. Educational advocates, therefore, should help school personnel: (1) find ways to integrate the accomplishments of Black men into the existing curriculum structure, and (2) continuously examine the curriculum to ensure that Black males are included in primary and nonstereotyped roles.

Ensuring role model presence. In addition to increasing the number of Black male educators, strategies must be aimed at compensating for role model absence in the school setting. Educational advocates, therefore, should help school personnel: (1) find ways to ensure the inclusion of Black males in classroom activities as tutors, educational assistants, storytellers, "room fathers," and field trip escorts; (2) find ways to encourage the participation of Black males in Parent-Teacher Associations and other school organizations; and (3) acknowledge the importance of non-educational personnel (e.g., Black male custodians and lunchroom staff) as valid mentors/role models and find ways to use them in the educational process wherever possible.

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Courtland C. Lee, Ph.D., is Associate Professor and Director of the Counselor Education Program at the University of Virginia.

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